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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 000334

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/07/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: NOGRALES ELECTED HOUSE SPEAKER

REF: MANILA 316

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, for reason 1.4 (d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a unanimous vote, the House of Representatives elected on February 4 Davao City Representative Prospero "Boy" Nograles as the new speaker, replacing political heavyweight Jose de Venecia, who occupied the seat for five terms (reftel). The 60-year-old, Catholic Nograles is the first Speaker from Mindanao, lending balance to an otherwise Luzon-dominated political hierarchy in the country. Lawmakers from the various political parties seized the opportunity for change in the House and elected the third-term Mindanaoan, who is a partymate and close ally of President Arroyo. Nograles has vowed to implement long-sought reforms, such as greater transparency in the use of public funds and fairer treatment of members irrespective of political affiliation. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) In his acceptance speech, Nograles promised to restore order and "heal the wounds" in the House following the bitter Speakership fight. He vowed to address the lack of transparency in the use of public funds, an issue often raised by reformists against the de Venecia leadership. He stressed that he wanted his term to be marked by consensus-building, consultation with peers, and "independent but cordial" relations with Malacanang. The unanimous vote in his favor perhaps showed the House's faith in his capacity to implement reforms. However, it more likely reflects members' recognition that it is in their best interests to work with the Palace, and critics were quick to point that the new Speaker's closeness to Malacanang will render it difficult for the chamber to assert its independence.

¶3. (SBU) Nograles received his law degree from Ateneo Law School, where he was a classmate and friend of the President's husband, "First Gentleman" Mike Arroyo. A dedicated student, Nograles ranked second in the 1971 Philippine Bar examination and practiced law until his election to Congress in 1989. Now in his fifth term overall -- third consecutive -- he has served in various committees and was majority leader from 2004-2007. Prior to his election as Speaker, he was head of the House panel in the bicameral Commission on Appointments. As a lawmaker, he has supported political and economic reform legislation, including constitutional reform. He has professed a conviction that the grant of presidential amnesty to communist rebels will encourage them to give up the struggle and support government. He has also opposed Church intervention in politics.

¶4. (SBU) Nograles is an advocate of the rule of law, human rights, and press freedom, and together with now Presidential Peace Adviser Jesus Dureza, he was among Davao City's first human rights lawyers, who helped the Church pursue justice for victims of the Catalunan Grande massacre in the late 1970s. He recently blamed a so-called Davao "death squad" for the killing of a journalist friend and is at odds with

Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte, with whom he had issues during the May 2007 local elections. Because Nograles is on his third and last consecutive term, he is reportedly planning to run in the 2010 Davao mayoral race.

¶5. (SBU) Nograles favors strong U.S.-Philippine relations, and is generally cordial with the Mission. He has publicly stated his support for the war against terrorism but has been critical of the Visiting Forces Agreement.

¶6. (SBU) Nograles was born on October 30, 1947, in Davao City, Southern Mindanao. He is married to Rhodora Bendigo, with whom he has four children.

KENNEY